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# New Filmmakers in the UAE

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## **New Filmmakers in the UAE**

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### **Abstract**

The aim of this research is to take a tour of the recent history of cinema in the United Arab Emirates and to focus on the new generation of directors who are changing the country's audiovisual map. This research on cinema in the UAE arises from the assumption that the cinematographic production of a country is part of its social reality, since it is developed within a certain culture. It then influences its history, its economy, its politics, its customs, and its imaginaries. For Pierre Sorlin (1977) cinema is a reality where “the visible” of a society is presented. Or as Jean-Pierre Esquenazi (2003) would say, cinema is an expression of the social and cultural field that the filmmaker uses to create his work.

At this moment, I am commissioning a film series at the Arab House in Madrid, Spain, which will start on May 4th, 2017, and will screen the films *City of Life*, *Hamama*, *See Shadow*, *Nearby Sky* and *The Tainted Veil*, and we will receive the outstanding visit of the film director Nujoom Alghamen. All the information is already in the web: <http://www.casaarabe.es/eventos-arabes/show/nuevos-realizadores-de-los-emiratos-arabes-unidos>

At the end of this Emirati film series in Madrid, on June 22, I will give a lecture entitled *City of Life, or the Film Industry outburst in the United Arab Emirates*.

This conference will be published in *The Awraq Journal* in the fall of 2017 [www.awraq.es](http://www.awraq.es)

### **Brief Development of this Research**

The cinema of the UAE is a reflection of a cosmopolitan society in which more than two hundred nationalities live together, and in which only ten percent of its inhabitants are local. Its history is recent: *Abr Sabeel* by Ali Al Abdul (1989) is considered to be the first movie

filmed in the country -although it was never released in a commercial theatre- decades before the British were the first ones to film documentaries in the area. Funded by the British Foreign Office along with British Petroleum, was *These Are Trucial States* (1958), recently found in the archives of the Imperial War Museum in London. Ten years later, *Farewell Arabia* (1968), directed by Randal Beattie about the early years of Sheikh Zayed as ruler of Abu Dhabi, came to light. The documentary, based on the book of the same title and written by David Holden in 1966, is nowadays a classic.

In recent years, the number of films, short movies and documentaries made by Emiratis has grown exponentially. Among the pioneering directors is Nujoom Al'Ghanem (2010). The poet and filmmaker began shooting in the late nineties and in all her documentaries, she rescues characters that allow us to imagine how Emirati society used to be not so many years ago, such as in *Between Two Banks* (1999), about the last rower alive in Dubai; *Hamama* (2010), documentary that narrates the life of an elderly and wise healer, or *Nearby Sky* (2015) in which she describes the steps of the only woman competing in a beauty contest for camels. In her latest work *Honey / Rain / Dust* (2016) Al'Ghanem has had the ability to show a local theme with great global significance: the ancient tradition of beekeeping and the disappearance of bees and other forms of life.

In the last ten years, a new generation of filmmakers, most of them trained at home and abroad, have been changing the audiovisual map of the Emirates. This is the case of Ali F. Mostafa (1981) and his first feature film *City of Life* (2009), which is a mosaic presenting different life stories starring the city of Dubai. Mostafa directed *Under the Sun* (2005), the television series *Classified* (2011), *From A to B* (2014), and more recently *The Worthy* (2016), all with great commercial success.

With a similar profile but a more intimate tone, Nawaf Al-Janahi (1977) filmed in a small village in the region of Ras Al-Khaimah, one of the seven emirates which is bordering Oman, *See Shadow* (2011), in which the filmmaker highlights the complex relationships of two young teenagers, Mansoor and Kaltham, and the difficulties they encounter in being friends in a traditional context. Prior to this film, Al-Janahi filmed the short films *Obsession* (2002), *On the Road* (2003), *Mirrors of Silence* (2006), and the feature film *The Circle* (2009).

The cinema of the Emirates reflects the broad linguistic and cultural diversity of the country and it is a clear example of the changes, advances and transmutations that this region is experiencing. *The Tainted Veil* (2015) by Nahla Al Fahad, Mazen al Khayrat and Ovidio Salazar gives an account of this. The documentary filmed in nine countries, gathers very different views and opinions on a subject as controversial today as the hijab.

Dubai and Abu Dhabi are nowadays two of the most important centers of creation, production and coproduction in the Middle East, where Arab directors and others, come to shoot and postproduce their series, television programs and films. The creation and success of *Dubai Media City* in 2001 was followed by the opening of *Dubai Studio City* in 2005. Another important platform for the development of the audiovisual industry in this area has been *Image Nation*, one of the leading media and entertainment companies in the Arabic-speaking world, producing local and international documentaries & television content and *the Dubai Film Festival*, which opened its doors in 2004.

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## **Webs**

Dubai Media City. <http://www.dmc.ae/en/>

Dubai Studio City. <http://www.dubaistudiocity.ae/>

Dubai Film Festival. <https://dubaifilmfest.com/>

Image Nation. <http://imagenationabudhabi.com/>